

Scholars Resume Writing History of CIA

Approved For Release 2009/11/13 : CIA-RDP01-00569R000100070008-7

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Somewhere inside the sprawling headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, a small group of professional scholars is producing volume after volume of secret history books that will never be found on the shelves of the nation's public libraries.

The CIA's historical office—little known even inside the agency—is a unique organization with unique problems.

"There are," said one person familiar with its work, "a lot of people out there who simply don't want things written down."

Under Director William J. Casey, an avid reader and amateur historian, the office has been reborn, after internal arguments and a depletion in resources killed it off three years ago.

"Casey is very favorable towards history," one former CIA official said.

"He seems to think that the work of the historical staff is important and has given some attention to it," according to another source.

"At the moment," said a government historian in another agency, "the office is undergoing a mild revival. How far it will get I couldn't predict. It just depends on who is and who isn't interested in having histories written. It's certainly not the sort of job I'd want to have. The difficulties are just too great."

The scholar who occupies the CIA's chair of secret history apparently had his doubts as well. Before taking up the post in August, 1981, according to a former colleague, Prof. Kenneth McDonald kept open his 20-year tenure at George Washington University for a further 12 months until he felt secure in the new job.

The CIA is proud of him—to judge by the relatively large amount of information the agency divulges about a career that includes four years in the Marines, a B.A. from Yale, a doctorate from Oxford and a professorship of strategy at the Naval War College.

But the agency will reveal nothing about the type or quantity of work now done by McDonald and three assistants.

"They write histories, internal CIA histories based on classified information," said spokesman Dale Petersen. "These remain classified."

But Director Casey's Project Will Never Reach Shelves Of Nation's Public Libraries

Former CIA officials and scholars say the office concentrates more on the structure and organization of the agency than on the history of individual operations, explaining why, for example, one section was merged with another at a certain time.

"Post-mortems" on operations, these sources say, may be found in the records of other CIA offices. One retired counterintelligence official returned to Langley on a contract to write a "narrative history that tied various incidents together."

The output of McDonald's office, according to people familiar with it, is "considerable" but uneven in quality. One official described it as varying "from quite good to extremely bad or even hopeless."

One reason for this, says one person who has seen the secret volumes, is that they are often written by officials approaching retirement or between assignments and who have only a peripheral knowledge of the subject and no historical skills.

The only publicly available information about the history program is buried in a footnote in a volume summarizing almost three decades of the CIA's existence prepared for the 1975 Church Commission study on U.S. intelligence activities.

Its author, committee staffer Anne Karalekas, included among her sources "approximately 75 volumes from the series of internal CIA histories, a rich if uneven collection of studies which deal with individual agency components, the administrations of the directors of Central Intelligence and specialized areas of intelligence analysis."

She described the material as constituting a "unique institutional memory."

Karalekas, according to a former official, "got to look at a lot of things that people normally wouldn't see."

The historical staff was established under the directorship of Gen. Walter Bedell Smith in 1951,

shortly after the CIA evolved from the World War II Office of Strategic Services.

"It has had a checkered history," says one scholar, "flourishing and receding depending on the circumstances."

In the mid-70s, Reagan administration sources say, the CIA office worked well, coordinating regularly with the historical offices of other agencies, especially the State and Defense departments, and helping them declassify CIA-originated material.

Under Jack Feiffer, McDonald's predecessor, said a State Department historian, "there was a brief flowering of the exchange of information." And that, according to another source, "contributed to Feiffer's rapid demise."

Around 1978, when an executive order by President Carter complicated the already tangled rules on declassification of government documents and the CIA budget was slashed under then-director Stansfield Turner, the agency's historical office began to wither.

"It was in the execution chamber for a long time," recalls one former agency man, "because there were efforts to study the situation and figure out what the programs should be." The final answer was that Feiffer was removed and the office died, formally ceasing to exist in January, 1980.

"A lot of people," says another ex-CIA official, "were horrified that a program that had already been pared down to about 1½ people should be closed down entirely. Turner's behavior was absolutely barbarian."

The closing angered other government historians, who lobbied for its reinstatement. It reopened, the CIA now says, in October, 1980, a few months before McDonald took up the job.

McDonald, according to a colleague in another government historical office, "is getting a fine reputation around town as someone who is intelligent and knowledgeable."

Under new legislation that will free the CIA from what it has called "unique and serious burdens" imposed by the Freedom of Information Act, the agency seems set to keep almost all its operational files under wraps for the foreseeable future. In return, the agency says, it will agree to review some material for declassification, a task which may fall to a revamped Historical Office with an increase in budgetary resources to match.